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Structure in political beliefs. A new model for Stochastic Unfolding with Application to European Party Activists

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ENGLISH SUMMARY

This study investigates interrelationships among the political beliefs of more than ten thousand active members of fifty political parties in nine countries of the European Community. These interrelationships are explored in part with a newly developed model for the analysis of preferences: stochastic unfolding.

Four types of political belief elements are distinguished; these can be grouped into two sets of two. The first set comprises opinions about the relative importance of different political problems and about proposed measures to solve them. The second set is composed of attitudes toward two kinds of organizations that deal with political problems: pressure groups (which introduce and organize action around political problems) and political parties (which may be in a position to treat them authoritatively).

Chapter 1 presents an overview of the literature concerning relationships within and among these four types of political belief elements, and evaluates a variety of theories about the nature of these relationships. A variable often mentioned as constituting a frame of reference for political beliefs is the left-right dimension.

Chapter 2 gives information about the party activists who served as respondents in this study and discusses the selection of parties and the representativeness of the respondents for a population of active party members. The specific questions designed to tap the four types of political belief elements to be studied are also introduced in this chapter.

If the left-right dimension is the major frame of reference within which political beliefs are structured, then interrelationships among political beliefs should be representable by a unidimensional unfolding model. In this model both respondents and political belief elements are represented as points along one dimension, such that respondents most strongly endorse those political beliefs that are represented in their vicinity and show decreasing acceptance of those that lie successively further away in either direction on the dimension. Chapter 3 discusses the unfolding model in detail, describes problems that arise because data seldom fit it perfectly, and suggests several strategies that could be used to improve its usefulness in such

English summary

situations. A recommendation is given for an approach that combines several of these strategies.

In Chapter 4 this approach is elaborated into a workable procedure for the stochastic unidimensional representation of all subjects and a maximal subset of stimuli, using dichotomous 'preferred - nonpreferred' data. This approach is analogous to Mokken's (1971) procedure for stochastic cumulative scaling. To illustrate the procedure, the stochastic unfolding model is applied to party activists' sympathy scores for six European party groups.

Chapter 5 presents an analysis of interrelationships among judgments of the relative importance of a set of fifteen political problems and among opinions about proposed measures for solving these problems. Political problems and measures fall into two groups in these analyses, one composed of progressive items and the other of conservative items. However, opinions about all items did not form a single scale, as had been expected. Judgments of importance were better represented by a multidimensional vector model. However, the hypothesis that structure among proposed measures can be represented with a single dimension may still be viable if respondents are not represented by a single point along that dimension, but rather by a closed interval of acceptable policy positions.

Chapter 6 gives the results of stochastic unfolding analyses of sympathy scores to national pressure groups and national political parties. In these analyses a dominant left-right dimension is found. Although other structuring principles (e.g., regional and religious cleavages) have an influence as well, these apply to only a few items and do not constitute new dimensions.

Chapter 7 summarizes the interrelationships found within each of the four types of belief elements and then presents interrelationships among the four types. All interrelationships are in the expected direction and most of them are very strong.

Chapter 8 discusses the newly developed stochastic unfolding model and compares its results for one dataset with the results obtained using a number of other data analysis techniques. The new model is found to compare favorably. Some of its strengths and weaknesses are then summarized. The chapter concludes with suggestions for further research in the areas of preference analysis, behavior and attitudes of party activists, and types and structures of political beliefs.